

SHARP. WRONG.
TABOO.

THORNS DUET **PREQUEL**

YELLOW THORNS

RINA KENT

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HATE & LOVE DUET

He Hates Me
He Hates Me Not

To the devious tendencies in all of us.

AUTHOR NOTE

Hello reader friend,

If you haven't read my books before, you might not know this, but I write darker stories that can be upsetting and disturbing. My books and main characters aren't for the faint of heart.

This book contains themes of consensual non-consensual and child assault. I trust you know your triggers before you proceed.

Yellow Thorns is the prequel of a duet and is not standalone.

Thorns Duet:

#0 Yellow Thorns (Free Prequel)

#1 [Red Thorns](#)

#2 [Black Thorns](#)

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BLURB

Blurred. Wrong. Taboo.

It wasn't supposed to happen. Not the first look.
Not the first kiss.
And definitely not the first run.
But it did.
She ran for it.
And now, my beast will come out to play.

PROLOGUE

AKIRA

Dear Naomi,
I'm your new friend.
Or at least, I hope to be.

Teachers in school told me it's a good idea to have a pen pal to help improve my English. So I thought, why not learn from someone who's living in the States, huh?

You must be wondering, why you? Good question.

I observed you once. Don't ask me where, because I want to keep that a secret.

But back then, I noticed two things about you.

One, you have a beautiful smile that reminds me of peach blossoms and falling snow. Don't make me choose between the two, because I dig both. So imagine my surprise when I found both of those traits in something as simple as your smile.

Two, you're so real that if anyone attempted to get inside you, they'd probably drown from how deep you are.

I volunteer to take a tour, though. If you'll let me.

Did that come off too strong? Forgive me. I tend to do that with people I'm eager to learn about. And there aren't a lot, for your information.

You must be wondering, how the hell does this freak know my address? Which is another good question, but I'd

rather not answer that right now.

Not because I'm a stalker, though you probably think I am at this point, but because I'm not even sure you'll see this, let alone reply.

Before I move on to the boring chore of introducing myself, let me tell you what compelled me to write this letter.

And yes, I know I mentioned the teachers, but we both know that's an excuse to get your attention, a lame one at that.

My real reason is: I want to get to know you.

The girl behind the rare smiles and the 'fuck the world' attitude. The girl who wears her black hair short and her lips pink. The girl whose headphones seem to be her only friend (what do you listen to, by the way?).

That might give me a few points on the creep meter, but I wanted to be honest with you. No secrets and no lies.

I promise I'm not a dick—not for long, anyway. And I'm not some sort of an otaku as you're probably thinking right now. If you don't know, otaku is a geek in English, or so I was told.

Now that all of that is out of the way, allow me to do the introductions.

clears throat

I'm Akira and I was born in Japan. Tokyo, to be exact.

In Kanji, Akira is written with the characters for 'sun' and 'moon,' so I'm sort of like the whole package, having both sunlight and moonlight. Am I a catch or what?

I'm a senior in high school, so we're similar in age and you don't have to worry about old geezers. Unless that's your thing. I'm not judging.

So now, the million-dollar question: Can you be my friend, Naomi?

Awkward silence.

More awkward silence.

Did that sound pathetic? Desperate?

Probably. At any rate, interpret it in your own way and let me know your reply.

If you don't want to, simply don't send back anything. I'll move on after a week or so.

But if you do reply, I'll probably do a year's worth of victory dances.

Just don't get any ideas about what this is. I can only be your friend, Naomi.

If you go and fall in love with me, I'll have no choice but to disappear.

And that's just sad.

And unnecessary.

IMPATIENTLY WAITING,

Akira

NAOMI

Everyone harbors a secret.
Some are mundane; others are downright twisted.

Apparently, my whole existence falls under the latter, because my mom is keeping it hidden like it's some sort of national intelligence.

Or maybe it's international, considering where she came from.

I kick the pebbles in my way as I unhurriedly make my way to cheer practice.

Blackwood College is one gigantic building with an ancient feel to it. A few towers stand proudly at every corner as if they're the watchdogs of this place—or that's what I've thought ever since I enrolled here.

Once again, courtesy of my dear mama, who hasn't only made sure I study in rich people's private universities, but also that I play the part by cheering and being in the popular crowd.

Who even likes cheering in college? Certainly not me. I'd rather live my twenty-one-year-old life listening to hard rock and having as little contact with humans as physically possible, thank you very much.

I'm not an antisocial who thinks stepping over people is okay. I'm merely an asocial who likes to leave them alone in hopes they'll do the same in return.

No luck thus far.

I stare up at the building whose walls I'm privileged to be within. A building that's as ancient as this town, located on the outskirts of New York City. Old, corrupted money constructed what others consider a place of elite education.

Well, maybe it is. Or maybe I'd appreciate it better if I didn't have to wear tight, tiny clothes that reveal my belly and strain against my sports bra that I wear in a fruitless attempt to flatten my huge breasts. 'Huge' per the cheer captain's words.

Why don't I just quit? Excellent question.

The answer is simple and boring—Mom.

As much as I have a love-hate relationship with the woman who gave birth to me, I haven't forgotten how much she struggled raising me on her own all these years. When I was young and depended on her, she worked several part-time jobs and barely slept to keep a roof over our heads. So when she begged me to make an effort about being in the cheer squad, I couldn't shoot her down.

She just likes seeing me in the spotlight, I guess. She wants me to make it so we don't give the racist pricks any chance to look down on us just because we're of Asian heritage.

That's the only reason I'm still part of this nightmare.

At least, I hope it is.

My footsteps are heavy at best as I shuffle through the entrance to the football field. Clear sky extends for as far as I can see and the early fall's sun shines down on the terrain. Due to the great weather, the captain and our coach decided we'd practice our routines outside.

There's some important home game at the end of this week between our football team, the Black Devils—stupid

name, considering the only thing devilish about them is their uniforms—and their biggest rivals from New York.

The cheer squad is lined up near the sidelines because, surprise, we're not allowed to disturb their majesties while they're practicing. It's already stupid that the squad exists for their benefit, but they have the nerve to treat us like we're their whores.

Most cheerleaders either fuck or date the football players, or they look at them as if they're Jesus in plural form.

Like me, all my female teammates are dressed in tiny black skirts that barely cover their asses and white tops streaked with black lines. The males are wearing black pants and white T-shirts. Now, if I were a man, I wouldn't have to put my body on display, but that would mean carrying the weight of all those girls during our routines, so, on second thought, no thank you. I'd rather show my belly button and kill my breasts with tight sports bras.

Can You Feel My Heart by Bring Me The Horizon is blasting in my ears one second, and the next, it disappears when my headphones are plucked away. I'm about to stab someone when my attention falls on none other than the captain of our squad.

Reina Ellis is tall, blonde, fit, and has deep blue eyes that she's currently judging me with. Oh, and she comes from money—not new like Mom's, but very old and influential.

So she's basically the whole package, as indicated by her nickname, Queen Bee, and has the personality to go with it.

She taps her foot on the ground while still holding my noise-canceling headphones—aka my saving grace—out of reach. "You're late, Naomi."

"No I'm not."

She grabs my wrist that has a smart watch on it and shoves it in my face. "What time is that?"

"Fine. I'm ten minutes late. So what?"

"This is your final warning, Naomi. Be late again and I'm suspending you. Countless people wish to be in your position, and if you don't want it, there's no need to keep it."

As if I care. I want to say that but bottle it inside because of—drum rolls—my mother.

Making me part of this plastic bunch was such a low blow, Mom.

Maybe she's taking revenge because of how much I pestered her with questions about my dad while growing up.

Maybe I'll have an emotional scar from the cheer squad and won't be able to live my adult life sketching mangas in a dark basement.

Or maybe I'll find my father and live happily ever after. Though, it's a long shot for that one.

"Are you waiting for an invitation?" Reina cocks her head to where the others are watching the exchange with clear disdain—toward me, not their beloved captain.

I extend my palm. "My headphones."

"After practice."

"But—"

"And only if you don't slack off." She turns around and waltzes to the others with a gentle sway of her hips.

Awesome. Now, I actually have to make an effort.

I try not to drag my feet as I follow after her. Snickers and whispers break out among the cheerleaders at my expense. They have this wolf pack mentality where one will start the mocking sessions and the others follow.

I glare at them. "What? You have something you're too scared to say out loud, so you prefer whispering like weak little bitches?"

"The only weak little bitch here is you, Naomi." Brianna, the co-captain and a member of Reina's mini-me club, points at me. "Look at your fat hips. I told you to start a diet."

"No, thanks." I place a hand on my hip. "And these are natural beauty. Don't be so jealous—it shows, Bee."

"It's Bree!"

"Oh, my bad." I offer a makeshift smile that only angers her further, turning her face a dark shade of red.

She actually has fair skin, but she spends a fortune to tan it, so whenever she's angry or frustrated—usually with me, because the others are too scared of her to speak out—she looks like a volcano at the point of eruption.

The best way to kill bitches? With kindness.

Honestly, I may have never let anyone walk all over me before, but it's these people and their constant bullying that's made me a bitch just like them.

Wait. Does this mean I'm one of them now?

God, no. This is only temporary until I graduate. Then I'll live in a basement and beg magazines to publish my sketches.

I only have to survive this last year and then I can chalk up the cheer squad and everyone in it to life experience.

My gaze roams around the endless haters' faces until I find Lucy's soft one. She grins at me discreetly, then instantly hides it, but it's enough to paint what resembles a smile on my lips.

She's shorter and thinner than me, but she has fiery red hair and adorable freckles that dust her cheeks. Lucy is the only one I'd call a friend in the midst of these shark-infested waters. Mainly because she doesn't belong to Reina's clique and is kind of a reject like me.

We've found company in our misery ever since we first met as high school seniors, and it's continued in college. Which isn't a surprise since almost everyone present studied with me in high school. Another prestigious private institution in Blackwood.

Mom and I relocated here during my senior year, and let's just say that immediately categorized me as an outcast.

Hence Mom's idea about my being part of the popular crowd by becoming a cheerleader.

Reina starts giving instructions and Lucy's attention goes to her, and in response, mine does, too, even reluctantly. Our coach, a middle-aged woman with long black hair and thin lips, barely says anything when her favorite captain talks.

I'm bored out of my mind, thinking about what food to grab later and if I should endure the witch hunt and the fat-shaming if I eat a slice of pizza in front of the squad.

Reina grabs me by the shoulders and hisses, "Focus or dream on about the headphones," before she tells me my position will be on the second line, the one right above the male cheerleaders and, therefore, I'll be carrying her and many of the others.

Yay.

Thankfully, I don't make many mistakes, except for nearly dropping Brianna on her face, but, oh well, accidents do happen.

At least I'm not distracted by the half-naked football players carrying whatever their coach gave them and running around the field.

I mean, yes, I want to watch male perfection, but I'd rather do it in secret behind my computer screen and not in an ogling, bring-attention-to-me kind of way, like the other cheerleaders.

If I do, it'll seem as if I'm interested in the football players, yet all I care about is the glistening of sweat on their abs that travels to other...places.

But I have this perfect poker face that no one is able to read behind. Lucy calls me unfeeling sometimes, but it's not that I don't *feel*. It's that I have immaculate control over showing my emotions.

I take after my mom, thank you very much.

So even when a whirlwind of emotions swirls inside me, no one can figure anything out by observing the outside.

Not even the one person I actually notice on the football team.

The one with sandy hair and sharp features and hard, glistening abs that could very well be used as a weapon.

The one who doesn't know half the campus exists, while everyone is taught his name the moment they step into Blackwood.

But that one? Yeah, I'm glad he knows nothing of my intentions, because I will get over him.

It's just a crush...if a crush can go on for this long.

No. I'm sure it's only a crush and only physical, because everything else is a big no.

At the end of the routine, I'm ready to go have my pizza and give the cheerleaders the middle finger if they say anything about my hips again.

As usual, all of them—Lucy included—kiss Reina's ass about how *perfect* the routine is and what a *queen* she is. Everyone except me, of course. What? She can handle some silent criticism.

Then everyone starts to leave, except her holy circle of vicious mini-mes. Brianna, no surprise there. Prescott, the male co-captain, and a few other cheerleaders who've managed to get Queen Bee's seal of approval.

This close circle is basically all about Reina's cult activities aka the secret dares that she makes them do because she's bored in her expensive mansion, and tormenting other people is apparently fun.

I'm about to pull Lucy away so we can go home and binge watch the latest true crime show on Netflix when Reina calls to her.

Lucy turns around, her cheeks red. "Y-yes?"

I sigh. I've been teaching her to grow into her confidence, but it seems that's going to be a very long process. Once shy, always shy, I guess.

"Stay," Reina says ever so casually.

My lips part at the same time as Lucy's. Reina didn't just invite her to join her cult, right?

My friend grins, her skin reddening with apparent excitement as she awkwardly makes her way to the captain's circle. Other members of the squad whisper, probably in both envy and hatred, as I try to make sense of the situation.

This...there's something going on. But what?

Or maybe there isn't and I'm just being paranoid?

But it doesn't make sense for Lucy to be part of Reina's close circle. She's shy and is mostly backup in the squad, just like me. We're the invisible ones, the ones who people like looking at when we're with the others but find boring individually.

All of Reina's other subjects are either as beautiful or accomplished—or damn rich—as she is.

Lucy is average on all of the above. Though, in my eyes, she's the prettiest.

I stride toward them, my steps wide.

Brianna slides in front of me, crossing her arms. "You weren't invited."

"As if I want to belong in your secret sociopathic witch coven." I extend my palm toward Reina. "My headphones."

She reaches into her bag and retrieves them but keeps them out of reach. "You were passable today, Naomi."

I snatch them out of her hand. "I'll call when I need your opinion of me."

"That will be soon, bitch." Brianna breaks out in laughter and the others follow, except for Lucy, and also Reina, who doesn't laugh or smile unless it's on her terms. She's a leader, not a follower, and makes that apparent in each of her moves.

"What is that supposed to mean, *bitch*?" I ask Brianna.

"Let's just say your holier-than-thou attitude will be gone once—"

"Bree," Reina cuts her off with a stern look before she directs me, "Off you go."

I narrow my eyes on her, then meet Lucy's gaze, but she gives me an apologetic smile. One that says she's staying with this band of assholes.

But then again, that's not a surprise. Luce has always loved Reina and her followers. If anything, this is like a dream come true for her.

Releasing a long sigh, I plug in my headphones and leave while listening to *In the Dark* by Bring Me The Horizon. Ordinarily, I'd wait until I was off of the field, but I'm more desperate than usual to block their whispers today. Especially since I don't have Luce with me to lessen the blow.

Does this mean I'm losing her to the queen bee? She has everything and everyone she wants, why does she have to take my only friend as well?

Sharp tangs of loneliness flood the base of my stomach and leave a bitter aftertaste at the back of my throat. And it scares me. The fact that I have no one and am all alone terrifies the shit out of me.

But no more so than the idea of actually reaching out to people and being vulnerable just so they can hurt me. Both are horrifying monsters I think of every day.

Ever since the day I trusted someone and they violated my innocence.

I'm so engrossed in my thoughts and the loud rock music that I'm completely blinded to my surroundings.

That's when it happens.

I see the ball traveling my way at supersonic speed.

But it's too late.

My legs remain frozen in place as my eyes widen in preparation for the impact.

But instead of the ball, a flash of movement catches in my peripheral vision before a hard body slams into mine.

And not just any body.

The body of the football player whose existence I've
spent years trying to ignore.
And failing.

NAOMI

I tumble to the ground.
Or rather, both of us do in a mess of limbs and groans and awkward touches.

More accurately, inappropriate touches.

Holy Jesus.

Please tell me I didn't just brush my fingers against his *thing* right now.

I quickly remove my hand while he's trying to get off me, and that knocks us both down again.

But this time, he's glued to me. His cut body covering my entire front and his naked chest on my breasts. Now, I'm definitely touching his thing—or my stomach is, anyway.

My cheeks would be flaming red if my emotions appeared on the surface. I never thought I'd feel the ridges of his body this intimately.

At least, not in this lifetime.

Jesus. His abdomen is as firm as the ground against my back, only it's soft enough to sleep on.

Or rub my face against it.

Or any other activity that includes touching it.

He plants his palms on the ground on either side of my head and pushes up a little. His stomach, thighs, and umm, his *erection*, are still pressed against me.

That's when I have my first full view of him.

Sebastian Weaver.

Star quarterback.

A former senator's grandson.

And dangerous.

It's not only because of his lethally attractive looks, because honestly? He could be the most beautiful man God has created. Okay, in the top five.

His face may as well have been sculpted from granite, all rough edges and with predefined expressions. Not in a serial killer kind of way, but in a 'hello, I'm your next fantasy' kind of way. His cut jawline and sharp nose add to the general perfection that God bestows upon only some of his creations.

His eyes, though, tell a completely different story. It's not solely about their light green color that resembles the shade of a tropical sea that I've only seen in pictures. But what's most striking about them is the fading light in their depths, almost as if he's mad with the supremacy he was given. Or maybe he considers it a burden.

Gee, if having his looks is a burden, we can switch.

Or not.

That would make me a guy and I'd have to carry the cheer squad.

Okay, wait. Am I really thinking about carrying the cheerleaders when I'm trapped under Sebastian's body?

A very hard one at that. No, I don't mean his dick is hard, though I think it's getting there, but all of him, from his chest to his thighs and even his whole face.

His dark sandy-blond hair falls across his forehead, creating a dreamy contrast against his sun-kissed skin and the light color of his eyes. Eyes that are currently narrowing at me as if I committed a mistake by merely existing.

"Move," he says in that slightly raspy voice of his, one that's meant to whisper dirty things in the dark.

Or maybe in the light. Who cares?

“What?”

“Either you heard me and you’re playing dumb or you have hearing issues. Both of which I don’t give a fuck about.”

My small ‘worship at his altar while ogling him’ phase comes to a screeching halt at both his words and their condescending tone.

Who does this asshole think he is? He might be a little attractive—okay, a lot, whatever—but that doesn’t give him the right to treat me like the dirt under his shoes. I wasn’t born for that position.

I adopt my half-mocking, half-snobby tone that I usually use when talking to Brianna. “Uh, hello? You’re the one who’s pinning me to the ground.”

“Because you’re wrapping your leg around mine.”

I lift my head and search around until my abdomen aches from the half-lifted position, and sure enough, my leg is definitely looped around his. And are his muscles twitching beneath mine or am I imagining things?

Way to go, me. One to nil, Black Devils.

But instead of acting like the idiot my brain is telling me to emulate, I don’t release him. “That’s only because of the fall. Don’t get ideas in your twisted head.”

“Maybe you’re the one whose head is twisted since it went straight there.” He grins, showing me his perfect white teeth, and while that’s considered a friendly gesture, the emptiness behind it forbids me from considering it as such.

I’ve been well aware of Sebastian’s reputation ever since I transferred here during my senior year of high school. One would have to be blind while simultaneously living under a rock not to recognize Senator Brian Weaver’s only grandchild and Blackwood’s favorite quarterback.

He’s the definition of a cliché with his mesmerizing all-American looks, background, and skill.

Everyone believes his grandfather is preparing him for a career in politics as soon as he's out of college and that football is merely a stepping stone. The NFL is too small for his ambitions and his future.

But that's not what I first noticed about Sebastian. It was neither who his family was, what he played, nor even what he looked like.

It was always his eyes.

The way they're muted, like right now, as if he's falling into a role.

He plays the social game so well, I'm jealous sometimes. I wish I could fake it as convincingly as he does. I wish I could smile at people when all I want to do is hide.

"Let's agree to disagree." He's still smiling, but he's not attempting to conceal its fakery anymore. That's what people do when they're fed up. They let the masks fall and allow their true selves to show through.

And right now, what he's projecting is entirely different from what he is.

"So are you going to release me or would you rather feel me up some more?"

I move my leg with a jerk. "You're the one who's doing that."

"Yeah, yeah, and I'm also the one who caged myself against you. Do you hear yourself?"

"Yes, I do, and I make more sense than you... Why aren't you getting up?"

The empty mockery on his features slowly breaks as a gleam shines through. "Didn't you say I was feeling you? Might as well go with it."

"Are you insane? We don't even know each other."

"Why does that matter? It's only a natural chemical reaction between healthy adults."

"Are you a fucking animal?"

"*Monster*, to be more specific." The way he emphasizes the word 'monster' sends a chill down my spine and it's with

effort that I manage to hold on to my agitation.

I slap my hands on his chest to push him away, but I barely manage to move the rock-hard muscles. "Get off me."

"Shhh. I'm not done."

"Done with what?"

"With you."

My toes curl and it takes everything in me not to knee him or something. I've always been bad at handling these types of advances, but especially if they're coming from someone like Sebastian.

I guess the rumors are correct after all. He'd really sleep with anyone, wouldn't he?

"Weaver!" a male voice yells and Sebastian begrudgingly gets off of me, the loss of his body rattling me more than I care to admit.

I jump to my feet, gathering my headphones and bag, thankful nothing was broken, and my attention shifts to the guy headed our way. It's Sebastian's friend, Owen, another buff football player, with darker skin and a shaved head.

Sebastian, however, doesn't make a move to leave, his feral gaze zeroed in on me. Embarrassment and a feeling I can't identify grab hold of me and I want to kick my leg in the air and run in an open field so I can breathe clean air and get rid of it.

"Want an autograph?" I snap, then regret it. I really need to learn how to control my temper and not throw a tantrum at everything. But I guess I constantly have this feeling that everyone is out to get me, and the star quarterback is no exception.

Especially with the taunting way he observes me.

He smiles again in that hollow way that might be a sign his soul was recruited by the devil. "I'll think about it and let you know."

"Think about what?" Owen wraps a hand around Sebastian's shoulder when he reaches us. "What's up with

you and the Asian chick?”

I place a hand on my hip. “The Asian chick has a name, doucheface, and it’s Naomi. Tell Siri to spell it out for you.”

And with that, I turn and leave, the echo of Sebastian’s laughter following me long after he’s out of earshot.

BY THE TIME I GET HOME, I THINK I’VE ANALYZED WHAT HAPPENED back at the field a hundred times over.

Okay, that’s a lie. It’s been at least double that.

Despite being a cheerleader, I don’t actually talk to Sebastian or play house with the rest of the football team.

Sure, Reina, Brianna, and the rest of the squad do, but I don’t for the simple reason that...well, they expect sex. It’s not rocket science and I’m not a whore.

So why the hell did I make myself look like one when I looped my leg around his?

Desperate much, Nao?

I text Luce to ask her to call me as soon as she’s done with whatever satanic rituals for shape and beauty Reina makes them do. But I know she’ll be too busy for me today.

Or ever, for that matter.

She practically sold her soul to the devil, and Reina will make sure to keep her occupied.

Our house, or Mom’s pride and joy, as she likes to remind me, sits on a large piece of land in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. We even have a huge-ass garage that we barely use and a fancy pool that Mom can show to her friends when she invites them over.

She always plays the game of ‘accept me!’ and it’s kind of frustrating. I’m way younger than her and I already understand that we, as minorities, just don’t get accepted. At least, not by most of the racists plaguing this godforsaken town.

If I had a penny for every time someone's called me 'exotic' or said I have such 'strange' eyes or that my soft black hair is so 'unique,' I'd be as rich as my mama.

She knows all that, but she just refuses to stop trying, which is both courageous and sad, I guess.

Instead of going inside, I rummage through the mailbox, searching for a very familiar black envelope...

Yes!

I get out Akira's letter and smile as I open it. I even pause my core metal playlist. What? It means the letter is *that* important.

Juggling the rest of the mail in one hand and my bag on my shoulder, I open the letter from my pen pal.

And yeah, that sounds outdated, but his first letter got me smiling, and I needed to smile that day, so I wrote back.

True, I still know next to nothing about Akira, but it's not like I'm telling him my deepest secrets or anything. It's just something that I look forward to every week.

And maybe that's because I'm pathetic and he's one of just two people I have as friends.

DEAR NAOMI,

Should I stop that? Starting the letter with Dear Naomi, I mean. Doesn't it sound tacky to you? I was thinking about it the other day, and somehow, it does to me.

Anyway, now that my musings about the salutation are out of the way, I want to tell you that your story for history class is lame.

You should talk about Japan and the Warring States period. You know you want to. But you can deny it, I don't care.

Well, you were born in America, so you might not consider yourself wholly Japanese, but let me insist on this. Do something cool instead of that old, rehearsed topic.

*My studies have been going well. Thank you for not asking. But then again, you probably think I'm a nerd and that studying hard is expected of nerds. *insert unflattering language here that basically means, screw you if you think that way**

Now, where were we? Right. My studies.

I don't like what I'm doing right now and I'm thinking about changing majors, but I don't know what I'll change to or if I'd be making the right choice.

Do you ever feel like you understand nothing and when you finally do, the doors are closed? It's like you arrive at life too late.

Or is that too melodramatic?

Anyway, I'm not going to bore you with my life's story. Tell me about you.

Are you still eating the hearts of the cheerleaders, or did you grow some balls and quit?

If that happens, don't worry, you can always be my Yuki-Onna. Or maybe I'm yours.

*SINCERELY,
Akira*

I SMILE AT THE DORK. HE ALWAYS HAS SUCH HUGE ILLUSIONS about Japanese spirits and their evilness.

He calls me *Yuki-Onna* because, according to him, I resemble her with my pale skin, rosy lips, and Asian eyes that are so dark, they're nearly black.

He says I have the beauty of the snow woman, a ghost who roamed the mountains on stormy winter days to lure mortals and kill them.

And since then, it's kind of become our inside joke.

I never thought this thing with Akira—friendship, as he calls it—would go this far, but I’m glad that I at least have him.

Even if I still don’t know what he looks like.

I contemplated asking for a picture; however, not only would he refuse, but it would also kill the image I already have of him. A cute guy who’s definitely an otaku and talks about porn more than necessary.

He’s corrupted me.

My feet come to a halt inside the front door of our house. It has a wide entryway into the living area that’s diagonal from the kitchen.

Mom stands in front of a mannequin, a pincushion on her wrist and a phone to her ear while she pins a piece of cloth to the mannequin’s chest.

She might have become the CEO of Chester Couture, but she still obsesses over a mannequin at home, trying to come up with her next masterpiece.

I hide Akira’s letter in my bag before she lifts her head. While Mom knows I have a pen pal from Japan, I don’t like her touching his letters. We talk about porn sometimes and that’s not a conversation I want her to be privy to.

“Honey.” She motions at a glitter box and I give it to her.

I opt to go upstairs to my room and grin like an idiot at the thought of rereading Akira’s letter and thinking of an equally sarcastic reply. It’s a game of ours.

“Nao, wait.”

I’m two steps in, but I turn around to face Mom. She has placed the phone in her slacks’ pocket, putting a rare premature end to her conversation with her assistant, her lawyer, her accountant. Anyone who needs the great Riko Chester’s time.

She was born in Japan as Riko Sato, but she changed her last name as soon as she got American citizenship when I was a kid.

Mom is a small woman but keeps her hair long, not short like I do, and she looks like my older sister, not the woman who gave birth to me. She has flawless skin and beautiful small features that she passed down to me. Though she's paler and has more dark circles than usual lately.

Her eyes are brown, but nowhere as big or as dark as mine. Which I guess is a feature I got from my father, who's sort of a taboo subject in front of her.

"How did school go?" she asks with a slight accent. Since she's first-generation, she doesn't really speak with an American accent as I do, but it's not for lack of trying. I guess being born speaking in a certain way stamps you for life.

I lift a shoulder. "The usual."

Mom reaches for her pack of cigarettes and steps back from the mannequin as she lights one, then takes a drag. "How about practice?"

"It was cool."

"Are you lying to me?"

"As if I could. You'd call the dean and get all the deets. Or maybe the coach, since she was there."

"Do not sass me, young lady."

"I'm not. Just making your job easy for you since, I don't know, you prefer asking others about me instead of actually attending any of the stupid games I bust my ass for."

"Watch your language. And it's not like I don't attend them because I don't want to. Some of us work, Naomi."

"Get back to it then."

"Nao-chan..."

My stomach flips whenever she calls me in that endearing way. It's like I'm back to being a little girl, when Mom was my world.

Until the red night shattered it.

She approaches slowly, releasing a puff of nicotine into the air. "Are you mad at me?"

"I don't know, Mom. Maybe I am."

She strokes my arm. "I'm sorry. I know I'm barely around lately. But it's all for you."

"No, Mom. No. Don't use the excuse that it's for me. It stopped being for me after you bought this house and secured both our futures. Now, it's just for you."

She drops her hand, and although it's painful and I want her to comfort me again, I'm well aware that it's useless. Mom will always do what she thinks is best, not caring about what type of results that brings to my life.

"One day, you'll understand it all. At least, I hope you will." She smiles with a hint of defeat. "Go freshen up before delivery gets here. I ordered Italian."

"What's the occasion?" While I'm secretly glad she's eating in tonight, I'm surprised she doesn't have some sort of a dinner set up somewhere with all the associates and business partners she has.

"Why does there have to be an occasion for me to eat with my daughter?" She smiles again, but it's still with that note of defeat, or is that sadness?

I don't ponder on it long, because she kills her cigarette in an ashtray and goes back to her work.

Me, however? I can't help the giddiness I feel at the thought of having dinner with her.

Maybe our little family isn't beyond saving, after all.

SEBASTIAN

Being brought up in a certain way puts specific expectations on me.

I can stand out, but not in a negative sense.

I can live my life, but not where it matters.

My whole existence has been mapped out ever since I was born as the senator's grandson and have had to play the role that goes with it.

Maybe that's why I'm often tempted to allow my rebellious side to get the better of me.

Why I sometimes let it rear its head and show the world the turbulent side of me.

You know, basic rich kid problems.

After practice, Owen drags me and a few other team members out for drinks with the cheerleaders.

I'd rather be sleeping, but Owen would probably display my head on a stick for the world to see. I kind of need my head—and everything inside it.

Besides, drinks with them is better than being trapped under the senator's and his wife's tenacious stares. Yes, they're my grandparents and the people who raised me, but I don't quite appreciate them when they barge into my apartment any chance they get, even long after I've moved out of their house.

Instead of drinks, Owen goes all the way for a meal at The Grill. We like this place because it belongs to Coach's brother, Chad, and he's a big fan of ours. Not only does he give us one of his private booths where we're hidden from the rest of the patrons, but he also serves us his best meals.

As soon as we walk inside, accompanied by some of the cheerleaders, Chad grins and points at us. "Give it up for the Devils, ladies and gents!"

Owen and the others make a show of tapping their jackets, on which the team's logo rests. The cheerleaders hoot and the men make howling sounds.

Most of the patrons clap, and endless praise and compliments shower us.

"Let's win State, son!"

"Show the Knights no mercy!"

"See you in the NFL!"

"Our heroes!"

Yeah, that's far from the truth, but this town is too obsessed with football. It's kind of unhealthy.

And yes, my thoughts remain, even as I grin, shake their hands, and take random selfies. In the span of a few minutes, I put on the show I was taught to perform when I was a kid.

Always smile. Always be on your best behavior.

Always put on a mask.

By the time we reach the stairs, I've shaken hands and taken pictures with most of the people present. Let's just say that Chad likes us as much as we like his place. Since everyone knows we hang out here, the restaurant is almost always full.

He gives me a bro hug, then clutches me by the shoulders. The smell of grease and pepper comes off him in waves. "My star quarterback."

"Not really a star yet."

"Oh, yes you are."

I grin. "I guess I'll show you this Friday."

“That’s the spirit, son!” He gives me an encouraging slap on the back like Coach does.

People in Blackwood expect one thing from me—to be efficient. It comes with the Weaver name.

Those who belong to my family need to bring something to the table, whether it’s grades, victories, a senatorial position, or a hotshot lawyer role like my uncle.

At any rate, I need to have something to offer.

After a glittery welcoming in front of the townspeople, Chad finally points us in the direction of our private booth.

Brianna, the co-captain of the cheerleaders, slips her hand through my arm as she paints on her own plastic smile. Hers is so overdone, it’s fucking turn off.

There’s an art in faking one’s smile. A part of you needs to believe in it. A part of you needs to send signals to your brain that smiling is the best solution for people to leave you alone.

We sit around the table, the guys already mixing and matching with the cheerleaders. There are five of us and about seven cheerleaders, so Brianna and Reina sit on either side of me. But everyone knows the blonde, blue-eyed beauty captain is off the table.

She’s engaged to one of our teammates from high school, and although he chose to study international law in England and hasn’t returned in three years, she still wears his ring.

In a way, we’re only keeping an eye on her so that no one gets close. At least, Owen and the others do. I’m interested to see the stern look on her face break, even if that means she finds another man.

Yes, I’m a horrible friend, but I blame it on small-town problems. As in, there’s barely anything considered fun around here.

And I’m not the type who can be allowed to have free time. If I do, my fucked-up tendencies will take reign, and that would just be...tragic.

To everyone else, not me.

Owen stands up, clearing his throat, and I groan. This is heading in a direction I can see from a mile away, but if I stop him, he'll pout like a bitch and be a general douche. I kind of need my wide receiver on my side, at least until the critical game.

He grabs a glass of beer and holds it high as he speaks in his dramatic tone, "I want to toast our star quarterback who gets all the praise—not cool, man—and to all the beautiful ladies who make us play like beasts. To the Devils!"

"To the Devils!" everyone else echoes and I tip my glass in his direction before I take a sip.

Owen finally takes his seat, but he leans into Reina's side. "Queen Bee, what are you gonna do for me if we win?"

She raises a brow while tracing the rim of her glass with her pink-manicured nails. "What do you want?"

"A BJ. If you give me that, I'll win all the games."

She smirks. "Maybe if you get drafted into the NFL, Owen."

"You think I won't be able to do it?"

"Show me what you got then."

"Oh, I will, babe. In fact, you'll love my dick so much, you might dump that loser Asher for it."

"Maybe I will." She smiles, and unlike Brianna, it's not plastic, but it's still as fake as mine.

A hypocrite does recognize a hypocrite after all.

We dig into our food—we order pasta while the cheerleaders settle for salad, as usual.

While I eat and indulge in the humor, I wait for the other shoe to drop or explode or whatever the hell Reina does in these types of situations. There's a reason she convinced Owen to drag us all here.

"Don't you think it's time for another dare?" she asks nonchalantly.

There.

The reason Reina has perfected her fake smiles and facial expressions. The real Reina hides beneath the surface and subtly toys with everyone around her.

How do I know? I do the same sometimes. The difference is, she does it for ambiguous reasons that don't usually benefit her. In fact, all the dares she's issued so far seem cruel but actually end up helping her victims.

In my case, I participate to get them off my back, not harm them. Unless they turn out to be annoying pests, which is when interference is necessary.

"Hell to the yeah!" Josh, one of my teammates, exclaims. "Loved playing a prank on our history teacher that one time."

"And I loved helping." Morgan, a cheerleader, winks and he licks his lips.

"We should take it up a notch, Rei," Brianna says in her slightly squeaky, hyperactive voice.

Prescott, the only male cheerleader present, takes a sip of his beer. "Or else, it'll get boring."

I can relate.

But at the same time, Reina's childish dares were never my thing. She's been amping them up from high school as if she's trying to prove a point.

Still, I need to keep up appearances and pretend that I belong to their holy circle. Partly because Owen becomes really grumpy when I ruin his fun. Partly because I have no intention of being trapped in my head.

That's not a very comfortable place, last I checked.

"I agree. We should spice things up a little." Reina meets my gaze. "Are you up for it, Bastian?"

I leisurely finish chewing, trying to figure out why she singled me out from everyone present.

It's a first, and I learned from the best to never ignore such deviation from the ordinary.

However, I can't put my finger on the reason for it.

"Is that a yes?" she insists.

“Hey, Queen Bee. I thought we would be sex partners.” Owen pouts, hitting his chest. “I have a black hole right in the middle of my heart.”

“Pass,” I say. “Asher would serial kill me if I come near you. I still need my life.”

It’s not a lie. The ever-so-calm Asher Carson turns into a violent motherfucker when it comes to Reina and often beat up guys for merely looking at her the wrong way in high school. Even though he’s currently away, if he catches wind of this, he’ll barge back in as if he never left.

But I’m merely using that as an excuse.

The actual reason? There’s no way in fuck I’d let Reina or anyone else use me as a pawn in their game.

I’m a senator’s son, thank you very much. We use people, not the other way around.

“I won’t be anyone’s sexual partner,” Reina addresses Owen and me, but her attention doesn’t waver from my face. “I have a dare for you if you have the guts to take it.”

“Yes, totally take it.” Brianna strokes my arm up and down in what she believes is seductive but is actually getting on my fucking nerves.

“Of course, he’ll take it.” Owen puffs his chest.

“Our quarterback isn’t a pussy,” Josh exclaims, and everyone else from the team hoots in agreement.

That seals it from my end.

I can’t go against it now, not when all the team members have accepted Reina’s dares in the past. If anything, they thought it was a privilege to be ‘chosen.’ I glare at the Barbie who’s still smiling with hidden triumph. She plotted this whole thing so I’d have no choice but to oblige.

“What did you have in mind?” I ask in the calm tone I’ve perfected so well.

“Fuck someone.”

Owen snorts out a laugh. “What type of dare is that? Chicks drop their panties for him without him having to ask.”

“Yeah, Rei,” Josh agrees. “He gets the best pussy without even trying.”

I raise a brow at Reina. “Is that really your grand dare? Fuck someone?”

“Not just anyone.” Her smile slowly vanishes, allowing a shadow to creep in. “Naomi.”

My smile falters at the same time as hers and I hope she takes it as if I’m mirroring her, not something else.

Images of delicate skin, huge dark brown eyes, and soft full lips come to mind. Those images play the way she stared up at me as a blush crept up her pale neck and cheeks, turning them red. The way her smart mouth retorted back at every turn as if she did it for sport.

And I couldn’t help picturing stuffing those beautiful lips with my dick and watch her fucking squirm.

“Nao...who?” Owen asks. “Wait a minute. Is it that Asian chick who was making babies with Weaver on the ground today?”

“That’s the one.” Brianna gives a foxy grin. “But she doesn’t like making babies. If anything, we think she might be a virgin.”

“Holy wow.” Owen chugs the rest of his beer. “The plot fucking thickens.”

Josh waggles his brows. “Can I have her, please?”

I let my utensils rest on the table. “Why her?”

“It was random,” Reina lies through her teeth.

There’s nothing random about this. Everything Reina does is calculated and has reasons only she is privy to. Did she come up with this dare after she saw me with Naomi earlier?

“And that bitch needs to learn a lesson.” Brianna takes a slurp of her green drink. “She thinks she’s holier-than-thou when she’s just a loser.”

“And she always talks back!” Morgan says in a shrill dramatic voice. “She doesn’t respect those who are higher in rank than her.”

"I don't see why that's my problem." I pick up my utensils again and pretend to be digging into my food, even though I'm barely seeing anything through my hazy vision.

No, not hazy. Red.

Like fucking blood.

"Is that a no, Bastian?" Reina asks. "Because I can dare any of the other guys to do it. Maybe Josh. He seems so into it."

"Yes!" Josh jumps up. "My Japanese porn fantasy will finally come true."

I lift my head, lips thinning, but I slowly release them.

The only image that comes to mind is that of a beautiful petite woman who'll be destroyed to pieces by the end of this bet.

And if anyone's going to be doing the destroying, it's only fair that it's me.

I won't take it far.

Or at least, that's what I tell myself.

I wipe my mouth with a napkin, meeting all their gazes. "I'll do it. I'll fuck Naomi."

To be continued...

Sebastian & Naomi's story continues in [Red Thorns](#).

Curious about Reina and her fiancé mentioned in this book?

You can read their completed story in [All The Lies](#).

WHAT'S NEXT?

Thank you so much for reading *Yellow Thorns*! If you liked it, please leave a review.

Your support means the world to me.

If you're thirsty for more discussions with other readers of the series, you can join the Facebook group, [Rina's Spoilers Room](#).

Next up is the continuation of Sebastian and Naomi's tale in [Red Thorns](#).

Blurb

A bet turned into a nightmare.

Sebastian Weaver is the star quarterback and the college's heartthrob.

Rich. Handsome. Bastard.

Everyone's attention flocked toward him and all the girls dreamed to be with him.

Not me.

At least, not until he made a move on me.

See, I thought I was stronger than Sebastian's charms.

I thought I could survive being his target.

I thought wrong.

Little did I know that he will make my most twisted fantasies come true.

Fantasies I didn't know existed...

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HATE & LOVE DUET

He Hates Me
He Hates Me Not

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rina Kent is an international bestselling author of everything enemies to lovers romance.

Darkness is her playground, suspense is her best friend, and twists are her brain's food. However, she likes to think she's a romantic at heart in some way, so don't kill her hopes just yet.

Her heroes are anti-heroes and villains because she was always the weirdo who fell in love with the guys no one roots for. Her books are sprinkled with a touch of mystery, a healthy dose of angst, a pinch of violence, and lots of intense passion.

Rina spends her private days in a peaceful town in North Africa daydreaming about the next plot idea or laughing like an evil mastermind when those ideas come together.

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